

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Death Cult in Hypermedia Environments: Martyrdom and Terrorism in the Neofascist Movement

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Abstract: The proliferation of images and videos online commemorating the death of martyrs is becoming more and more widespread within the neofascist movement. Ceremonies honouring fallen comrades today go viral on the Internet in a manner that information technologies could not facilitate in the past. Neofascist organisations share these ritualistic practices on the Internet, producing hypermedia environments: specific media content that creates a dialogue between the digital and the physical realm. Analysing these hypermedia environments enables a better understanding of neofascist representations and tactics today. Noting that supremacist terrorism is widely excluded from the far-right hypermedia fabric, while the martyrs of neofascism are at the centre of these actions, this article illustrates the shifts that the movement is experiencing, from a clandestine offensive to a self-defence mass strategy.

Keywords: Neofascism, martyrdom, terrorism, hypermedia, violence

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Introduction

Celebrating martyrdom has historically been a common practice in the far right – that is, in those political organisations defending a hierarchical and anti-egalitarian vision of society, based on traditional values and a rejection of liberal democracy.¹ Paying tribute to comrades who have died for the cause allows members to unify and create bonds within the movement ritualistically.² Ceremonies during which fallen soldiers are commemorated have strengthened the politics of spirituality within fascism and the far-right.³ First as heroes, then as myths, martyrs crystallise the cult of sacrifice and death within far-right ideologies. These ceremonies involve the occupation of space and, whether in broad daylight or at night (e.g., in the form of torchlight processions), the far-right parades under the captive watch of passers-by. These marches usually conclude in a symbolic place.

Today, neofascists seek to take over not only a designated physical space but also the cyberspace.⁴ Establishing a synchronic dialogue between the offline and the online, neofascist groupuscules and organisations shape hypermedia environments around the commemoration of their designated martyrs. However, due to their fragmented and de-territorialised character, the neofascist movement does not agree over the canonisation of some of their comrades or likeminded individuals. The martyrs of neofascism are enthroned because they can be ascribed certain values upon which the movement builds its politics. White supremacist shooters tend to be excluded, even ostracised, from any kind of commemoration. Terrorists like Anders Breivik or Brenton Tarrant are neglected from the space and, therefore, from these hypermedia environments, precisely because they do not correspond to the ideal type of the neofascist soldier, nor do their actions correspond to the strategy that the movement seeks.

This article will discuss the particular nature of neofascist martyrdom nowadays. After reviewing the theoretical and ideological basis of martyrdom within neofascism, an empirical analysis of neofascist hypermedia environments allows us to infer conclusions about the state of the cult of death in the neofascist movement today. It will be argued that spheres of meaning created around a death cult in hypermedia environments – i.e., media content that is put in relation to both online and offline realms – legitimise the commemoration of certain martyrs instead of others and sublimate their sacrifice. Whilst fallen militants are subject to political remembrance, tribute to far-right terrorists is barely paid beyond the fringes of the Internet and almost never make it to the public sphere. The exaltation of the first through diverse hypermedia environments indicates the kind of commitment sought after by the movement, their strategy and their tacit approach to violence. Furthermore, this hypermedia ritualisation of martyrdom contributes to solidifying the transnational bonds of far-right organisations, developing a common set of codes within the transnational neofascist movement and modelling a specific geopolitical representation of Europe and the West.

All in all, this article seeks to address the crucial necessity to broaden the field of studies concerned with neofascism's current "visual culture"⁵, as its images and representations reflect a concrete ideology and rationale that guide the movement, allowing researchers a better understanding of it. Notably, analysing the celebration of martyrdom within different neofascist organisations is capital as, through these ceremonies, they recreate and consolidate their transnational bonds, while also outlining a particular strategy for the violent defence of Europe and the West. After discussing the results of the analysis, the domain of terrorism and extremism studies may be provided with new theoretical insights, hopefully expanding knowledge about visual realities and, specially, neofascism's new approaches to violence, including a nuanced rejection of terror and a renewed sublimation of death, delineated from a position of victimhood and self-defence.

Understanding Neofascism

As a fundamentally Western European phenomenon, neofascist ideology was constructed as an alternative to fascism and Nazism starting in 1942.⁶ The defeat of the main ultranationalist forces in their respective countries, first in Italy and Germany, then in France after the capitulation of the defenders of French Algeria, led what remained of the international far right to rethink their strategy. The main enemies of fascism, namely egalitarianism and its derivatives such as liberal democracy or human rights, were (and still remain) the same ones of neofascism. However, Jacobinism and Aryan supremacism began to lose importance in front of an idealistic unitary representation of Europe. Further, in neofascism, modern idiosyncrasies of fascism also lost ground to a largely conservative and reactionary social ideology.

Terrorist violence and vanguardism are also largely discarded in current neofascist endeavours such as the New Right, the neofascist school of thought that neglected militant politics and opted for a cultural shift – *metapolitics* – to become hegemonic.⁷ At most, violence is framed as part of a larger defensive strategy against the avatars of the modern world – i.e., multiculturalism, communism or different designated ghosts like wokeness or cultural Marxism. Nevertheless, as this article will illustrate, violence is not completely delegitimised within neofascism as it can become the ultimate resort to defend the last remains of a delusional and idealised traditional order.

A Theory of Neofascist Martyrdom

To fully grasp the nature of martyrdom in today's neofascist ideologies, it is important to delineate the fascist martyr, differentiate it from others and define it. Firstly, the fascist type of martyrdom is quite distinct from the Christian one. Although it seems contradictory, mainly due to the influence of Roman Catholicism in some fascist movements, there are some essential differences. Christian martyrdom evokes the death of a victim, one who pays the price of their faith. Martyrdom in Christianity takes on a fundamentally passive role. In fact, a good Christian is not supposed to actively seek martyrdom, as this would go against the sacred principle of human life, just like suicide. Christians are even compelled to express love to the people responsible for their martyrdom. As stated by Pope Benedict XVI: "Martyrdom is an act of love, towards God and men, including the persecutors".⁸

The concept of martyrdom in jihadist terrorism is closer to the fascist type than to the Christian one. Within violent Islamic jihadism, there is a vocation for suicide. This is compensated with a whole device of spiritual and material incentives.⁹ The death cult in jihadism is more pronounced. The far right has historically weaponised the Bible and Christian mythology to justify violence and continues to do so today.¹⁰ However, the parallels between the far right and jihadi martyrdom – such as a profoundly reactionary vision of the world, a political rationale motivating people to take action or their willingness to sacrifice, just to mention a few – bring both phenomena closer. If they do diverge substantially, common traits, especially those observed in studies on the "white jihad" hybrid, are notable.¹¹

The logics of fascist martyrdom are more scattered and less regulated. In addition, fascist ideologies are backed by a less extended historical background. Since fascist regimes were largely defeated after WWII, neofascist intellectuals, movements, and organisations have produced a more decentralised, even contradictory, politics of the dead. In a moment of relative retreat and marginality, the idea of sacrifice (for instance) does not necessarily entail death anymore: do not kill nor die. Lacking any institutional or national reference, as it was during fascist Italy or the Third Reich, and because the neofascist movement is essentially a transnational loose

coalition of organisations and groupuscules, the canonisation of contemporary comrades is subjected to debate and they are not unanimously recognised.

Nevertheless, the neofascist movement today still draws on the cult of martyrdom from interwar fascism. As Gentile eloquently puts it, the experience of the Great War and the cult of fallen heroes in fascist Italy “contributed to spreading among the fighters the idea of politics as a total experience [...] to not returning to the banality of everyday life, but perpetuating the heroic impetus of war”.¹² Funeral rites, often sublimated through the cry “Present!” after evoking the name of the fallen, represented a sort of secular liturgy connecting life and death, reinvigorating the bonds between past, present and future.

Ultimately, these men, or more generally the image of these men as projected by fascist martyrdom, were mostly headed towards death. However, it is important to note that in neofascism, death is avoidable. Gabriele D’Annunzio’s aphorism stating that “If dying means ceasing to fight, one cannot die” resonates vigorously with neofascist ideologies.¹³ A soldier is determined to die for the cause but equally contemplates life in a vitalist and heroic manner. The traditionalist thinker Julius Evola, a key figure in the renewal of the post-WWII far right, embodies this idea in his representation of medieval chivalry.¹⁴ Evola opted for “the hero before the saint and the victor before the martyr; whose values were summarized in fidelity and honour, more than in *caritas* and love”.¹⁵ Ironically, Evola’s knight submits the fascist soldier to an apparent contradiction, which extends to the rest of the neofascist movement: for a hero to turn into a myth, he must first become a martyr.

Today, the struggle of neofascism is different from that of historical fascism. There is no nostalgic vision of a conflict like that of the Great War. The fight is rather against the alleged “death of the spirit”¹⁶, social and civilizational decadence, multiculturalism or some other ghosts that haunt neofascism. To keep the flame of a languished movement alive, the mythology of the dead is embodied in different sorts of martyrs. Those who were canonised by regimes like Nazism, the Francoist dictatorship in Spain, or even by ultranationalist movements in the past, as Robert Brasillach for the French far-right, benefit from a sustained and regular tribute. Spanish phalangists are known to parade the streets of Madrid to commemorate the death of José Antonio Primo de Rivera, just like French ultranationalists bring flowers to the cemetery of Saint-Germain de Charonne in Paris to honour the victims of the 6 February 1934 crisis.

Recently established neofascist organisations also pay homage to their own fallen comrades. Fundamentally linked to a groupuscule kind of activism, martyrs and militants share a generational bond and common trait: their youth. The neo-Nazi organisation Golden Dawn in Greece has commemorated since 2013 the death of Manolis Kapelonis and Giorgos Fountoulis, two members of the organisation killed in retaliation for the death of anti-fascist rapper Pavlos Fyssas. Inheriting the martyrs of the Italian Social Movement (MSI), CasaPound members gather in memory of the killings related to the Acca Larentia massacre in 1978, which took place during the Years of Lead in Italy. Sebastien Deyzieu, a member of the Pétainist movement L’Œuvre Française, who died while running away from the police after a demonstration in 1994, is honoured by an annual parade organised by the Committee May 9 (C9M), mostly controlled by the Groupement Union Défense (GUD). In Sweden, the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM) also weaponises the death of Daniel Wretström, a skinhead teenager killed in 2001 during a fight with youngsters of immigrant descent, whose passing is remembered with a torchlight procession.

These ceremonies are not only attended by local members of the organisations. The acts usually provide a meeting point for international neofascists to strengthen their ties. The death of some

of the most iconic martyrs has historically stimulated the creation of special bonds within the larger European neofascist movement. In Spain, local neofascists have developed a particular sensitivity towards the Romanian Iron Guard around a shared Latin vision of fascism.¹⁷ Ion Mota and Vasile Marin, two legionaries¹⁸ who volunteered to fight during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), have, as of today, a monument dedicated to them on the outskirts of Madrid, where Spanish and international neofascists regularly meet.¹⁹ In turn, Spanish phalangists, also joined by French neofascists, often travelled to Tâncăbești, where the Iron Guard's founder Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, was killed in 1938.²⁰

Younger organisations also engage with this transnational dimension of neofascism. When Daniel Wretström passed away, the neo-Nazi organisation Blood and Honor stated that he was the “Horst Wessel of our generation” – in reference to the iconic young martyr of Nazi Germany – and that “Europe weeps for a fallen hero.”²¹ On several occasions, neofascists from central and Scandinavian Europe have travelled to Salem (Sweden) to participate in the night march honouring the death of Daniel Wretström. Similarly, a delegation of Italian members of CasaPound went to Greece in 2023 to attend (alongside neo-Nazis related to Golden Dawn) the 10th anniversary of the death of Manolis Kapelonis and Giorgos Fountoulis.²²

There is still another kind of martyrdom commemorated by today's neofascism, although not strictly related to the death of fallen comrades. Many victims of attacks perpetrated by racialised people, especially minors, are presented as martyrs. When in October 2022, 12-year-old Lola Daviet was brutally murdered in Paris and Dahbia Benkired, a woman of Algerian origin, was identified as the main suspect, her death was associated with that of a martyr by identitarian authors and neofascist groups.²³ Also in France, in November 2023, the death of 16-year-old Thomas Perotto in a mass fight against other young Frenchmen of immigrant descent triggered a similar outrage.²⁴ Both deaths provoked the reaction of the transnational neofascist movement, mobilised in their respective countries. They were also branded as a “Francocide” by leaders of the French far-right such as Eric Zemmour. This use of the concept of martyrdom applies not only to individuals when designating victims of immigration and multiculturalism. In the case of the coastal city of Calais (France), known for being home to an important migrant population seeking to cross the channel over to the United Kingdom, the historic militant of the French identitarian movement, Philippe Vardon, referred to it as the “martyr city”.²⁵

Debating Martyrdom: The Case of Dominique Venner

The tension described above – between death and the representations of the hero, the martyr and the myth, reflected in the works of D'Annunzio or Evola – is synthesised in the figure of Dominique Venner. A founding member of the French New Right and posthumous reference author for international neofascism, Venner committed suicide in 2013 in the Notre Dame Cathedral of Paris. The purpose of his act was to awaken consciences and set an example of stoic heroism. Indeed, his goal was met after his death, which triggered the creation of the Iliad Institute the following year later as a beacon for his legacy to live on.²⁶ Under the premise of the Great Replacement theory²⁷ and campaigning for a return to the pagan and Christian roots of Europe, the Iliad Institute has radicalised the last remaining vestiges of the New Right.

The significance of Venner's death is not interpreted unanimously. Although on some occasions he has been called a martyr, the Iliad Institute is very reluctant to do so.²⁸ Even if the representation of the martyr and the hero overlap in neofascist martyrology, it seems like the Iliad Institute makes a clear distinction between the former and the latter, Venner being, for them almost, exclusively a hero. His sacrifice elevates him and lays the foundations for a believable myth.²⁹ Nevertheless, it is precisely the choice of committing suicide which was not convincing for other

comrades. Former member of the New Right and key ideologist of transnational neofascism Guillaume Faye expressed doubts back then regarding Venner's decision:

Venner did not kill anyone but himself. He did not detonate a suicide vest. He interrupted his life and put his plunge into death in service of a message. He followed precisely in the footsteps of Yukio Mishima. Now, what I said is not a certainty. Everyone follows his path. I have never considered suicide as a means of sending a message. Simply because death interrupts the flow of the message. Unless you think you have said everything.³⁰

During an interview for a media outlet linked to the Iliad Institute, Dominique Venner's widow left an enlightening testimony about the reception of her husband's suicide among his close political circles.³¹ Clotilde Venner noted that older generations of far-right militants, who had become "conformist bourgeois", did not understand Venner's gesture and found it extremely troubling.³² She also indicated that "many Catholics said that it was a sacrilege" and that, generally, she received "very unpleasant remarks" from his entourage. Clotilde Venner did praise younger militants who "truly understood his death very well" or, as she presented it, his "deeply anti-bourgeois action". She specifically mentioned the tribute paid by the militants of CasaPound after Venner's death.

Beyond primarily intellectual circles, his death is commemorated all over Europe. Venner left an enormous literary production as an alt-historian,³³ but it is without a doubt his books about his militant life, including *For a Positive Critique* (1962) or *Un Samourai d'Occident* (2013), that have been most translated and caused the greatest impact. It is not the intellectual but the comrade who is remembered, and one can argue that without having inflicted death on himself, Venner would hardly have acquired the status of a myth. Yet precisely because of it, he is remembered in the West and the cry of his name is followed by a "Present!" in countries like Serbia, Italy, Greece, or France.³⁴

Dominique Venner's manifesto *Un Samourai d'Occident* (2013) recounts a struggle against the death of spirit and the replacement of European populations. In this breviary, the image of the samurai epitomises *Gesta non Verba*, in other words, action and honour over words.³⁵ Venner praises Zen as a "rejection of thought",³⁶ as the way to overcome all reflection and reason that restrains us from taking action. In Venner's manifesto, Japan finds itself in an equally-balanced commitment towards Modernity and Tradition, the latter being strongly associated with the mystique of the warrior. Faced with the samurai's spirituality, Venner laments the loss of the transcendental bond that European knights developed with their sword.³⁷ Ultimately, samurais represent in the eyes of Venner an aspirational detachment from death, a cult of sacrifice.³⁸

The rest of Venner's breviary is a constant reference to Greco-Latin classicism. Venner affirms that Europe must return to its classical heritage to rediscover its roots. Combining a personal interpretation of Stoic philosophy and the poetry of Homer, specifically the Iliad, Venner praises heroism and moral righteousness. His ideal of duty is embodied in Hector, the Trojan prince who dies at the end of the war against the Greeks, as recounted in the Homeric poem. Hector personifies the unwavering patriotism of the one who is ready to die for his kingdom, his wife and his son. In fact, Venner establishes a link between Hector's homeland and his family, arguing that both his wife and son are its concrete representations. If Venner's suicide is commemorated as the death of a martyr, it is mainly because he theorises and personifies the ideal of the neofascist man and the strategy the movement aims to follow: a struggle of self-defence to protect Europe's soul from the Great Replacement.

Analysing Neofascist Martyrdom Through Hypermedia Spaces

After following the activity of the large grassroots neofascist organisations mentioned above – all of them movements with moderate or non-existent institutional representation, with a relevant presence within the European neofascist milieu, significant numbers of followers on social media and that have already attracted the interest of other researchers³⁹ – it has been stated that the commemoration of martyrs represents a major event for them. In addition, the sublimation of neofascist martyrs in hypermedia environments allows us to understand who is granted the legitimacy to be commemorated and, most importantly, how the prototypical hero and the strategy of today's neofascism is profiled. The online communication and diffusion of these rituals, as well as other events and actions that far-right groups stage in the physical realm, shape what some scholars have agreed to call hypermedia environments.⁴⁰ Accordingly, hypermedia environments are digital spaces that combine the online and the physical realm to spread a certain message and reinforce its emotional charge. Within the far-right, highly performative ceremonies shared in hypermedia environments – like the commemoration of martyrs – have, as Önnersfors suggests, “the deliberate purpose of online dissemination, appealing to both cognitive and behavioural dimensions of social activism”.⁴¹

The refinement and sophistication of these communication methods, between the physical and the digital world, reinforces the affective and political impact of transnational neofascism, as well as their eventual virality. For years, the aesthetics of the movement have been progressively merging within cyberspace. Some channels of the messaging platform Telegram function as an agora, where the international far-right shares online content, usually tailored under similar patterns. In channels like Ouest Casual, much of the digital imagery representing scenes of the physical world involves a dramatic show of force.⁴² Groups of individuals and members of grassroots movements, using standard dress codes, occupy the public space of their local strongholds. These exhibitions are recorded and then posted online. When filmed, the scenery, music and final editing are very much standardised. The style of the lettering on the banners, illuminated by the brightness of the flares, the bridges on which they are displayed – everything is part of a global decoration, a game of mirrors.

The cult of death is also capitalised in the digital realm, independently from the physical one. The anniversaries of the deaths of the leaders of historical fascism, as well as the passing of fallen comrades, prompt the publication of posts with images and texts of a political and mystical nature. For instance, the legacy of the Iron Guard's leader, Corneliu Codreanu, is regularly commemorated.⁴³ When the day of his martyrdom arrives, 30 November, users on social media extensively share images of his face and captions, alongside old photographs of him. Around 17 August, images of Rudolf Hess also circulate on Telegram channels of neo-Nazi ideology, to remember him on the day of his death.

These digital campaigns are usually reinforced by ceremonies and actions in the physical realm. In 2013, the Evolian traditionalist group Fronte della Tradizione placed posters in multiple cities across Italy on the 75th anniversary of Codreanu's death. The banners either displayed the face of the leader of the Iron Guard or the symbol of his movement, all containing the caption “Love the trench, hate the drawing room”.⁴⁴ Likewise, in 2022, the neo-Nazi cultural association Devenir Europeo organised a similar action, covering several Spanish cities with posters and stickers to commemorate the death of Rudolf Hess.⁴⁵ German counterparts of Der Dritte Weg also uploaded several images and videos of ceremonies organised in honour of Albert Leo Schlageter, the Prussian member of the Freikorps who died in 1923 and turned into a martyr under the Nazi regime. Whether in the forest or abandoned buildings, under the glow of torches

and flares, or hiking in the mountains, the members of this neo-Nazi party perform a ritual during these ceremonies to later disseminate the images on their social networks.

Since his death in May 2013, Dominique Venner has been rewarded with much greater recognition than he received during his lifetime. Throughout Europe, the neofascist movement has elevated him to the summit of commitment and sacrifice. On the 10th anniversary of his death, members of different European grassroots movements and organisations paid tribute to Venner on Telegram and other social media. Homages involved the placement of posters in public spaces, the documentation of the process and its later diffusion online. Images from Germany, Spain or Austria, to name a few, circulated in the pan-European Telegram channel Zentropa, while Italy and France remained the most active countries.⁴⁶

The tenth anniversary of the death of Golden Dawn militants Manolis Kapelonis and Giorgos Fountoulis was also celebrated in November 2023. On previous occasions, some footage of the tributes was posted on far-right Telegram channels like Samurái de Occidente.⁴⁷ The images show a large crowd at night, illuminated by candlelight. While gathering around the monument that bears the pictures of the death, a cry resonates in the darkness: “*Αθάνατοι!*” (“*Athánatoi!*”, “Immortals!”), which the crowd repeats right after, followed by the Greek national anthem. If the images are striking, the dialogue between the online and the offline realm is still very rudimentary in the communication of the heir organisations of Golden Dawn.⁴⁸

The Nordic Resistance Movement also uses the cult of the dead to reproduce its own hypermedia environment. Commonly associated with a pan-Nordic identitarian and national socialist ideology, the NRM has rallied on several occasions over the memory of the victims of the Dresden bombing in 1945 by the Allies.⁴⁹ Similarly, the commemoration of the Finnish soldiers and Swedish volunteers who died during the Civil War of Finland (1918) and the Winter War (1939) against the Soviet Union, popularly known as the Day of the Fallen Soldiers, is an important day for the NRM. Local leaders of the movement in Sweden and Finland are filmed in cemeteries and other iconic locations, reading a manifesto. The videos conclude with the sound “*Nordiska motståndsrörelsen, Närvarande!*” (“Nordic resistance movement, present!”).⁵⁰

Some other hypermedia actions of the NRM are of more significance. In December 2023, a video was published on their official site and Telegram channel with images of a march in honour of Daniel Wretström. Beyond the demonstration, the footage shows NRM member Joakim Kannisto giving a speech and confronting a man labelled as a “racial stranger.”⁵¹ At the end of the video, there is a QR Code that gives access to an article in which the moral of the action is explained in depth. Not only was the death of Daniel Wretström remembered that night, but also that of the American neo-Nazi militants Robert Jay Matthews and George Lincoln Rockwell, of Horst Wessel and, finally, those of “all the people who died as a result of mass immigration.”⁵² The pictures portray a reduced group of men, first parading over the city of Västerås (Sweden), carrying a banner with the slogan “The blood of martyrs demands struggle today!”, next to the tomb of Daniel Wretström, in Northern Västerås. Despite a proper editing of the action’s footage, the text of the article establishes a dialogue between the online and the offline realm, describing meticulously how everything unfolded:

When the comrades arrived at the location, they formed into ranks again, this time with flags and a wreath at the forefront. Once again, torches were lit to illuminate the winter darkness. With the snow falling over the silent cemetery, the train moved slowly and quietly towards its destination [...] Candles were placed along the path to Daniel’s grave, with several larger candles having already been lit in front of the tombstone. Comrades stood behind the grave with flags, as the wreath was laid and

torchbearers lined up, one by one, to place their own candles next to Daniel's resting place. They then stood in two rows on either side of the grave, holding the torches in their left hand.⁵³

The key reference for high-impact hypermedia campaigns was – until their dissolution – Generation Identity (GI), whose communication strategy caught scholarly attention.⁵⁴ According to Cahuzac and François, GI's approach was intended to be eminently cultural and metapolitical.⁵⁵ Considering violence as sterile, or at least not defending it openly, this youth group resorted to social media to impose their ideas on the political mainstream. Their role model became Greenpeace, and their mode of action, was the public incident.⁵⁶ GI's most spectacular initiatives included patrolling the border between Italy and Spain, driving Toyota pick-ups like some jihadist groups or flying over the area in helicopters. Even if the views of the videos on their channel did not usually exceed tens of thousands of views, most media outlets contributed to their dissemination as they felt compelled to report on their actions.

When celebrating their fallen comrades, CasaPound Italia has perfected the porous frontier and interaction between the online and offline realms. Named after the American poet and supporter of fascist Italy, Ezra Pound, this organisation was first established as a countercultural political movement opposed to MSI's electoralism.⁵⁷ However, CasaPound maintains a historical bond with the MSI. Every 7 January, members of CasaPound congregate at the square of Acca Larentia, in front of an MSI premises, where in 1978, events unfolded culminating with the killing of three members of the MSI youth group by communist antifascists.

The performance is filmed from the very moment the preparations begin.⁵⁸ Some videos show the Celtic cross engraved on the floor of the square. CasaPound militants appear with their faces uncovered in front of the camera while they chat or smoke, accompanied by a solemn, sometimes agitated, music in the background. The president of the organisation and former leader of the RAC group ZetaZeroAlfa, Gianluca Iannone, is usually present. In some videos, the moments leading up to the participants' gathering around the square also appear. Once all have congregated, the images show the plaque with the names of the murdered, near the MSI premises. The camera reveals a shot of portraits of the young deceased, printed and pasted on urban furniture. Little by little, the attendees are arranged in a military phalanx, facing the plaque. Some militants step forward to offer roses and flower wreaths. Then comes the climactic moment. After the offerings, a voice breaks the silence to cry out: "*Per tutti i camerati caduti!*" ("For all the fallen comrades!"), to which the crowd responds in unison making the Roman salute: "*Presente!*" The screen darkens, and this same dialogue appears written across the screen and the video comes to an end.

The Committee May 9 (C9M) in France has also polished its communication strategy. This platform, mainly composed of members from the neofascist student union Groupe Union Défense (GUD), was founded two days after the death of Sébastien Deyzieu in May 1994, while he was running from the police and fell from a building.⁵⁹ At a time when the French neofascist movement and the National Front (renamed National Rally in 2018) were much closer, the leader of the GUD, Frédéric Chatillon, and then-member of the National Front youth, Samuel Maréchal, created the C9M. Its purpose was to organise the annual march that commemorates Deyzieu's death every 9 May. The march, which usually goes across the left bank of Paris, has so far taken place without any impediment from the police prefecture due to what they consider to be peaceful behaviour on the part of the protesters.

For some years now, C9M has used images of their demonstrations to produce visual content very similar to that of CasaPound. GUD militants appear in their videos, usually wearing balaclavas or other piece of clothing to cover their faces. The predominant colour is black, and some wear

classic leather jackets and aviator glasses referencing traditional ultra-nationalist aesthetics. Styles deriving from hooliganism and mainstream dress codes are also present. On the banner preceding the demonstration is written “*Sébastien, présent*”, on some occasions surrounded by the names of other dead comrades in Spanish, Russian, or Greek. The demonstrators brandish black flags with the Celtic cross, the symbol adopted by transnational neofascism after WWII and particularly by the GUD today in France. Throughout the march, they light torches even in broad daylight. When they arrive at the building where Deyzieu died, they gather in a military formation in front of it. Again, after some speeches, the crowd remains silent until a voice shouts the rallying cry: “*Pour tous les camarades tombés!*”⁶⁰ (“For all the fallen comrades!”), to which the assembly answers “*Présent!*” and shouts the GUD’s historic slogan “*Europe, jeunesse, révolution!*” (“Europe, youth, revolution!”). Then, a group enters the building, to the courtyard where he fell. Once flowers are left as an offering, they sing the old nationalist chant *Les lansquenets* and the screen fades to black.

Why Are Lone-Wolf Terrorists Ostracised From Hypermedia Fabric?

Paradoxically, whilst the number of far-right terrorist attacks continues to grow steadily,⁶¹ public and unambiguous support of terror remains scarce, even within the large neofascist movement. After the massacre in Norway by Anders Breivik in 2011, only the more marginal segments of the global far-right were those who sided with him.⁶² Similarly, when Generation Identity was accused of being linked to Brenton Tarrant, primarily due to the various donations he made to the organisation prior to the Christchurch shooting in 2019, they refused to recognise any affiliation with him.⁶³ Since this same link was one of the reasons motivating their dissolution, they even condemned Tarrant’s massacre in 2021.⁶⁴ In this sense, the author of *The Great Replacement* (2011) Renaud Camus, when asked about the crimes perpetrated by Tarrant, due to the similarities between his work and Tarrant’s manifesto, also condemned this violence.⁶⁵ As it will be demonstrated later, the key to the strategy of Camus or other neofascist intellectuals and organisations is to condemn these acts, while inciting other types of violence. Breivik or Tarrant have been canonised within the fringes of the Internet, but scarcely praised outside it, remaining ostracised from the dynamics of hypermedia. Even the way they are paid tribute online is different. Although they usually are portrayed as saints, these representations are covered in a cynical and nihilistic veneer,⁶⁶ and having little or nothing to do with the martyrs previously mentioned. They are rarely commemorated with ceremonies during the day or at night, in videos or pictures. These shooters are remembered through histrionic and provocative memes, in tune with the satire that is characteristic of environments such as 4chan or similar forums. By taking on their role as the anti-hero of the white race by pushing the limits of this taboo to the maximum, users praising them may take real action someday. But it seems like the purpose of communities praising far-right terrorism is essentially to create a bond between their members while playing with the limits of the taboo of violence.⁶⁷

In fact, online subcultures, allegedly more supportive of supremacist terrorists, do not univocally side with individuals like Breivik or Tarrant – not to mention with people who sanctify them. Consulting 4chan’s archive, both shooters have been criticised because of their choice of target. White supremacists attack Breivik for choosing young white people⁶⁸, just like Tarrant is blamed for targeting Muslim elders and children – rather than male adults or Jews, following the antisemitic version of the theory of the Great Replacement.⁶⁹ Detractors of far-right terrorism also resort to conspiracy theories to condemn the attacks. Thus, according to some users, Israel and Mossad were behind Tarrant’s attack,⁷⁰ while freemasonry was behind Breivik’s.⁷¹

Both this atmosphere surrounding the vindication of supremacist terrorists and their path to become martyrs is contested by more established organisations or renowned neofascist intellectuals. If their ideology resonates, their strategy and representation of martyrdom differs. Not only do they reject terrorism to a great extent, they do not express any particular recognition towards them. Arguably, the representation of the neofascist martyr differs from the profile of far-right terrorists. While the first is portrayed as a hero, the embodiment of an ideal in its purest form, the second is associated to psychotic pathologies and social awkwardness, and characterised as an uncomfortable and alienated man rather than a mass leader.

A former member of the terrorist group Organisation Armée Secrète (OAS), Dominique Venner ended up diminishing, and almost rejecting, the role of terrorism in the struggle back in the day. As a former volunteer of the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962), Venner was incarcerated between 1961 and 1962 after pleading guilty to supporting the generals' putsch against Charles de Gaulle.⁷² While serving his sentence, he wrote *For a Positive Critique* (1962), one of the books that laid the foundations for the neofascist far-right's new strategy.⁷³ Drawing from Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?* (1902), Venner heavily criticised the internal dynamics in which his older comrades were subsumed, including their lack of a solid organisation to seize power and maintain it, unawareness of new ideological frameworks to reinvigorate the neofascist movement, and a disinterest to fight on ideological grounds.⁷⁴ Regarding terrorism, he affirmed the following:

Inept situational analysis, and the absence of doctrine and training that pushes some towards opportunism, throws others into counterproductive violence and terrorism [...] Blind terrorism is the best way to alienate the general population. As indispensable as clandestine action and the calculated use of force can be when a nation has no other means of defending itself, especially when this action seeks to call the populace to action, terrorism places those using it outside the popular community and is condemned to failure.⁷⁵

Gerd Bergfleth, a German specialist of Georges Bataille and prominent intellectual source for the French New Right during the 1990s, identified terrorism as a product of Western decadence, as "the spearhead of European nihilism."⁷⁶ According to Bergfleth, the death of a terrorist – in this case suicides committed by members of the Red Army Faction in Stammheim Prison (1976-1977) – barely managed to escape a materialist logic of exchange. There is no spirituality since death is part of a calculation from which a political result is expected. The terrorist, he argued, "does not give his own death, but sells it, and as expensive as possible".⁷⁷

There is another logic underlying the critique of the terrorist strategy: in a moment of militant scarcity, every man counts, and prison or death should not be an option. During the interview with Venner's widow, an idea haunts the conversation on several occasions: her husband's death seems like a waste, a discouraging gesture for other militants. For some, there is no heroism in suicide, an act often complicated to absorb through a neofascist or conservative rhetoric.⁷⁸ Suicide or even kamikaze missions have been previously dismissed by other representatives of the neofascist movement. Koehler speaks of the introduction to the fourth edition of James Mason's *Siege* about this stance:

SIEGE [...] expounds on how it is nowadays absurd to contemplate full engagement against ZOG [Zionist Occupation Government] by means of noble violence, as there is no longer the existing time, numbers, or expertise to wipe the slate clean in this manner. The pages of SIEGE bear testament to the many who have tried 'heightening the contradictions' through guerrilla warfare [...] and lost, becoming purposeful

martyrs either imprisoned or killed outright. Thus, only the second half of the equation remains a viable practicality—a Total Drop-Out and with-drawal.⁷⁹

Discussion: Martyrdom, Hypermedia and the Neofascist Strategy

Hypermedia spaces are being structured and monopolised by European neofascists with the intention of sublimating the cult of death. The tribute that has historically been paid to the martyrs of fascism is being reformulated and progressively strengthened through the penetration of the far right into cyberspace. Many of the videos of the tributes to the martyrs of CasaPound and C9M have been uploaded to the Ouest Casual YouTube channel. Although controlled by French members of the neofascist movement, Ouest Casual centralises the codes that are used in the hypermedia space of European neofascism. CasaPound and the GUD, two organisations united through historical links via members of European neofascism such as Frédéric Chatillon or Gabriele Adinolfi,⁸⁰ shed light on the transnational synergies that neofascism aims to follow.

For several years, literature has demonstrated the tactical and cultural shift operated by neofascism that allowed the movement to avoid marginality and full ostracism.⁸¹ Action has been subordinated to reflection and the battle of ideas currently occupies a central place within the strategy of the abovementioned groups. This includes their interpretation of the use of violence as a means to an end. Today, neofascism does not openly advocate direct action or terrorism, but supports violence and presents it as an inevitable consequence. After portraying itself as the victim under siege – of the migratory invasion, the great replacement or wokeness, to name a few – neofascism struggles, following the Evolian principle, to “keep standing amid a world of ruins.” Theirs is not a strategy of action, but of reaction. In a C9M statement in which they celebrate the martyrdom of Deyzieu, the signatories explain why they compare themselves to the statue entitled *The Guard* (*Der Wächter*, 1940) by Arno Breker and the Tyr rune, by delving into this idea:

The Guard (*Der Wächter*), a bas-relief by Arno Breker, sculpted in 1940. Destined to adorn Germania, this monumental work is significant both for its size (17m high) and its symbolism: an athletic warrior, his face proud, implacably determined, ready to fight. In his image, we are the sentinels of Europe, guardians of our civilization, firmly resolved to defend it. The rune of Týr, or rune of Victory, is also that of just war. We are indeed waging a legitimate war against the enemies of our people. We will not stop fighting until victory, whatever the cost.⁸²

A similar pattern has been identified by Bjørgo and Ravndal in their study of the NRM and its relation to violence and terrorism.⁸³ The NRM rejects terrorism in the short term because it argues that the social and political atmosphere is not favourable for implementing such a strategy. Just like Venner in the past, NRM ideologues like Klas Lund, after a prison sentence on terrorism charges, seem to fear that terrorism is counterproductive for the movement itself. Similarly, apologising for terrorism is also identified within the movement as self-defeating for its larger mass strategy. Violence is accepted, as it does not entail a moral problem at all, but only one that can portray the NRM as the victim of a civilizational conflict and dedicated to self-defence. For the NRM, as Bjørgo and Ravndal state: “Violent self-defence is not only acceptable but desirable”.⁸⁴

Renaud Camus has also articulated a similar discourse. During the same interviews in which he condemned Tarrant’s shooting or “individual acts of violence”, he added: “I am non-violent but not at all pacifist. I do not eliminate war at all if it is to save one’s homeland, but I completely rule

out attacks and violence”.⁸⁵ These types of statements reinforce an idea that other researchers have already confirmed: that the theory of the Great Replacement encourages the outbreak of a civil war.⁸⁶ While terrorism is rejected because of a lack of popular support, violence related to these imagined conflicts, portrayed as ethnic or civilisational, is evoked with less criticism within the neofascist movement. For organisations such as the GUD or CasaPound, which also buy into replacement-related theories, violence is legitimised, even romanticised, as it is presented under the appearance of a patriotic war of self-defence. In a context where conspiracy theories like the Great Replacement are increasingly gaining popular support – due in part to its trivialisation in the political field and media discourse – transnational neofascism can justify its own violent strategy, different from terrorism, and even trigger outbreaks of violence beyond its own movement.

The cult of sacrifice and death, organised today around the commemoration of the passing of Dominique Venner or other fallen comrades, sends a message of heroism and resistance. When members of the neofascist movement organise locally – either to celebrate the death of their own martyrs, to show solidarity towards other organisation’s fallen soldiers or to mourn the death of the alleged victims of multiculturalism – and share these acts in a performative manner within hypermedia environments, they are trying to legitimise a collective reaction and if necessary violent, against the modern world. Since the common trait shared by all the deceased is their status of victim, killed at the hands of the designated enemies of neofascism, this mythology of death allows them to motivate empathy and a reaction of a victim mentality. The reasons used to justify violence are the same social anxieties and moral panics that have obsessed the far right throughout history, fundamentally the fear of the extinction of the white race or the fall of the West – the latter being represented as a civilisational, spiritual and traditional order.

The hypermedia commemoration of martyrdom in neofascism corresponds to the ritualisation of political mythology, a way to sublimate struggle and self-defence from a position of victimhood.⁸⁷ The demonstration of the NRM in December 2023 was quite explicit: not only did their banner state “The blood of martyrs demands struggle today!”, but the statement of the demonstration reported “The Resistance Movement remembers fallen heroes who fought and died for our cause, for the survival of the White race.” This is also the implicit logic underpinning Venner’s premise “to exist is to fight what denies me”⁸⁸ – in other words, the aestheticised cult of death by neofascist organisations in cyberspace. The recognition and celebration of sacrifice in hypermedia spaces show that neofascism chooses not to resort to clandestinity to fight for its civilization and for its race, as it can be performed in broad daylight, and condemns terrorism while advocating for an alleged right of self-defence.

Conclusion

This article has delved into the representation of martyrdom within hypermedia environments and its role in the transnational neofascist movement. Commencing with a theoretical analysis of the inherent contradictions and the significance of martyrdom in fascist and neofascist ideologies, the argument unfolds that the ritualisation of the passing of fallen comrades, framed as victims of an imagined civilizational order, allows the movement to legitimise and even implement a strategy of self-defence. By constructing hypermedia environments that sublimate the commemoration of martyrs and strengthen the bonds of the movement on the Internet, transnational neofascism is forsaking far-right terrorism in favour of a mass strategy. Through these rituals, anchored in both the digital and physical realms, neofascism is progressing in its normalisation process, making its ideas more acceptable.

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- 84 See in *ibid.*
- 85 "Je suis non-violent mais pas du tout pacifiste. Je n'élimine pas du tout la guerre si c'est pour sauver sa patrie, mais j'écarte tout à fait les attentats, la violence". URL: <https://lcp.fr/programmes/le-grand-remplacement-histoire-d-une-idee-mortifere-107146>.
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